

# THE OBSESSION

Entry No. 31 in Our Prize Story Competition

BY HULBERT FOOTNER



"My Obsession Is  
Mother Goose Rimes."

(Miss Erda Hammill and Miss Betty Bukannon in peignours and slippers are discovered toasting marshmallows over the open fire in the pink and white bedroom of the latter young woman. The hands of the clock on the mantel above their heads are about to meet at the top of the face. There is no light but that from the fire. Erda speaks.)

MY brother Corwin says it's an obsession—have you ever noticed how boys always sprout a crop of big words with their mustaches? It's like this: when your brain stops working for a moment, and your head is perfectly empty, before it starts off on a new track something rolls around in it like a pea on a hot shovel. I knew a girl at college who at such times always found herself muttering "Fourteen hundred and twenty-nine," and there was another who said "Ichthyosorcerous" over and over. She didn't know what it meant, and neither do I.

My obsession isn't so silly as that; it's Mother Goose rimes. And really, if you stop to think, there's a lot in Mother Goose. There seems to be a rime to fit every mood. When you're all trembly and jumpy, what could be better than, "Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle"? And when you're in the dumps doesn't "Three wise men of Gotham went to sea in a bowl" just express it? And when you're filled with that big, solemn feeling of I don't know what, you naturally say slowly, "Fee, fi, fo, fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman!" One generally keeps an obsession to oneself, it sounds so silly. But mine helped me out of an awful scrape this summer. Wait till you hear!

I WAS almost engaged to Thomas Bunting, you know.

No, I didn't care about him especially; but I had my plan of life all doped out, as Corwin says, and had decided not to care for anybody really. You see they all say I'm pretty, and seem to like me,—I don't think so myself; but I suppose I have my moments,—so I was just going to be sweet to everybody alike, and not be bothered myself with any topsyturvy feelings.

It's true Thomas is so soft you could poke your finger through him; but he was a willing slave. He's tall and loose jointed, and he falls over everything or drops it, and the worst thing about him is, no one ever thinks of calling him Tom. He's a Thomas through and through. But I thought he would do as well as anybody.

I've changed my mind. Men are like marshmallows,—aren't they, Dear?—either like they come out of the box, floury, tasteless, and sticky; or else like this one, properly toasted, a little bitter and crackly on the outside and—oh! sweet underneath.

The Buntings asked me to go for a cruise down Chesapeake Bay in their motor yacht. Of course I knew what this meant. This was to clinch matters. They would have invited the lady in the moon if their darling had cried for her. But I was quite willing to let it happen. I had some lovely yachting clothes.

"It's going to be a picnic, my dear," Mrs. Bunting said to me. "We won't take any servants. I shall do the cooking, Thomas will steer, and we're taking a

young man from Mr. Bunting's office who knows all about machinery. He's a gentleman and will be quite one of us," she thought it necessary to add.

Mrs. Bunting, I should tell you, is a dear little old fashioned rolipoly, with her front hair waved and laid down smooth on each side of her forehead. She always has a surprised and scandalized look. Her husband has been poking fun at her for twenty-five years, and she still takes him seriously. She's a little balmy on the subject of her Thomas.

It was great fun getting ready, though Thomas scarcely ever left my side, and when he did his mother would be whispering his praises in my ear, or his father would drop perfectly transparent hints of what he meant to do for Thomas later on. The Lorelei was a love of a boat, and I was to have the cunningest little stateroom!

Everything went well until just before the start from Sparrows Point, when I met the young engineer, and he had a perfectly horrible effect on me. His name was French Straiker. He was the dark, thin kind that looks so well in rough outing clothes. He had a kind of careless, scornful air. I had on my prettiest embroidered dress and my lingerie hat—and he scarcely looked at me! I spent ten minutes there on deck doing my prettiest to old Mr. Bunting, and that French Straiker went on coiling his old ropes the whole time, and never looked around once! I felt like sticking out my tongue at him! He was very good looking, Dearest. He had that hard look that softens only for one girl, you know, and every girl that sees it wants to be it.

The strangest part of it was, I instantly began to hate Thomas in the most unreasonable way. His wrinkly white ducks, and his brass buttons, and his yachting cap, and his marine glasses were perfectly ridiculous. His canvas shoes clung to the deck like immense white pancakes. Thomas made calf's eyes, and breathed heavily down the back of my neck—you know the see-how-devoted-I-am kind. Good Heavens! I thought, what will the other one think of a girl who stands for this kind of thing? And I got hot and cold all over and found myself muttering, "Peter, Peter, punkin eater," a sure sign of threatening showers.



That French Straiker Never Looked Around Once!

I HAD not been on board long before I discovered the only man that knew anything about a boat. Less than a hundred feet from the dock that silly Thomas, in his anxiety to show off, ran us smack in the mud. He blamed it on French Straiker for answering the engine room signals wrong; but it was Thomas who got the bells mixed up. French Straiker just showed

all his white teeth good naturedly, and got her off. After that he had to keep one eye on the engine and one on the steering wheel, or we should have been running into things all the way down the river.

You see, Dear, the trip started very badly for me, and it went from bad to worse. I had planned to manage everything so sweetly, and here I was quite distracted! I seemed to go all to pieces. I was furious with myself. You know how I always despised girls who had no control over their feelings. But that man always seemed to put me in the wrong. He was exasperatingly right in everything he did. He worked from morning till night; he could even wash dishes without losing his dignity.

The others treated him as something between a friend and a servant; but it never ruffled him. He went about his work looking as if he had pleasant thoughts inside his head that he didn't feel called upon to share with anyone. I didn't know how to act toward him. If I ignored him, I felt like a snob, and if I was friendly I felt as if I was throwing myself at him. At night I used to lie in my bunk thinking of the different kinds of food I had made of myself during the day. I repeated Mother Goose from end to end to keep from thinking of him; but the moment I fell asleep I started to dream of his handsome, good humored, scornful face, and would finally wake up weeping. There's a confession for a self respecting girl to make!

Meanwhile, fancy how I was enjoying that overgrown Thomas' lovelornness! Thomas was like liquid glue. In the daytime I kept his mind distracted a good deal by letting him take my photograph. They seemed out awful, and I destroyed them, except one that wasn't so bad. It showed me in my white Peter Thompson sitting among the cushions in the stern with an expression as if I had broken my best doll. I let him keep that; but the silly thing lost it, and I wouldn't let him have another.

I dreaded the approach of night. We always laid our anchor in one of the harbors. The old people remained below—to keep out of the dampness, they said—and there was nothing for me to do but sit with Thomas in the stern. Very often French Straiker would be sitting up in the point of the bow with his back to us, strumming on a guitar very softly. That's where my heart was! It was moonlight too.

I used to show Thomas as plainly as I could that I didn't like sitting close or anything; but you couldn't snub him! Talk about rhinoceros hide! Thomas' way with a girl was to make believe in the face of Heaven and earth that she was fond of him, and that a perfect understanding existed between them. What can you do with a man like that, short of making a regular scene? And how could I do that while I was a guest on board their boat?

His conversation was about as interesting as a patent medicine almanac. Thomas used to impart information. It's a wonder I didn't become a gathering idea. I used to close my eyes and think over the wonderful brilliance of Mother Goose as compared with Thomas.

ONE night he heard me muttering and asked me to repeat what I said.

I was too far gone to make any pretenses. I just opened my eyes in an innocent stare and murmured:

There was a man in our town,  
And he was wondrous wise,  
He jumped into a bramble bush,  
And scratched out both his eyes.  
And when he saw his eyes were out,  
With all his might and main,  
He jumped into another bush,  
And scratched them in again.

Thomas laughed in a constrained way, and tried to take my hand.

I ticked off his fingers. "This little pig went to market; this little pig stayed at home; this little pig had rare roast beef—"

Thomas dropped my hand as if it burnt him. "Can you find the lady in the moon?" he asked foolishly.

Thomas is like a cake that didn't rise, or jelly that refuses to set. There's something lacking. He became more and more alarmed at my foolishness, and of course I enlarged upon it. Finally I began to talk about insanity in an offhand way.

"It's a funny thing, isn't it?" I asked.

"I am unafraid to see the joke," said Thomas crushingly.

"But you never know

